

A brief guide to replacing cable in the US

By Tom Merritt



Cutting the cord-- getting rid of cable and replacing it with watching things over the Internet-- has never been more viable. Depending on your situation it may save you money and it certainly gives you more control. Assuming Internet service is a given, there are three groups who might benefit from cord-cutting.

Light Viewers

If you don't watch a lot of TV but like to have a few nice things to watch on occasion, you can definitely save money. An antenna for free over the air programming and a one or two online services might be all you need.

Medium Viewers

If you have a few favorite shows but don't need to see every single thing that comes out, you still might save a few dollars. You certainly won't feel like you're paying for programming you never watch.

Heavy Viewers

Even if you have to see every hot new show and watch every popular live event you still might break even on the money and you definitely earn control. No more long calls with the "retention representative" every time you want to change programming. And you can turn services on and off as you need, without breaking a contract.

This guide is meant for beginners though the cord-cutting veteran may find it useful as a reference. What follows are the three steps to cutting the cord, with an overview of the major services and equipment.

Cord-cutting Step ONE: The First Question

The first thing you'll need to ask yourself when considering dumping cable or satellite is, "What programming do I really need?" Which channels can you not live without and which are replaceable by similar services. Then you can decide on the services you need to get that programming and the equipment you need to get those services.

Types of programming

There are a few main types of programming to think about.

Live Lean Back - This is where you just want to turn something on to have on in the background or to take your mind off the hook. Maybe it's sports or HGTV or movies, but it doesn't matter exactly what show or game. Sling TV, Pluto.tv, PlayStation Vue, and diamondclub.tv can fill these. To an extent YouTube can too. And of course an over-the-air antenna can get you a lot of this.

Series Discovery - This is when you want to watch a TV series but you don't have a particular one in mind. You're just looking for something good. Netflix, Amazon Prime and Hulu are all the good for this. Though the TiVo autorecord feature (from an antenna) can provide a similar selection.

Series you need - You have to watch The Walking Dead or Modern Family or whatever your favorite show is. Services that provide this can take a number of forms depending on the show you want. A live service with some on demand options like Sling TV or PlayStation Vue might fill the need or you may want to buy season passes from a store like iTunes, Vudu, M-Go, Google Play or Amazon. Of course some shows are on dedicated services like Netflix, Amazon Prime or HBO Now. And of course Hulu has next day showings of many major network shows.

Live events – Whether it's the Super Bowl or the Oscars or a presidential debate, these are things you need to watch along with everybody else as they happen. Your best bet is a live service like Sling TV or PlayStation Vue or in many cases, an antenna. CBS All Access can also come in handy here. Sometimes events, like the Oscars and the Super Bowl, are made available free on the Web or in apps.

Sports - This one is very complex. If you happen to like teams that are not in the market you live in, it's a bit easier. You can subscribe to season passes for major sports leagues like MLB, NBA and NHL. Sling TV has the ESPN family of channels and PlayStation Vue has the Fox Sports channels and some regional sports nets.

Finding out who offers what shows

Unfortunately, there isn't one TV Guide-like service yet for telling you exactly what channels and programming are available on what Internet services. For some like the live services, you just have to go to their websites and look.

However, for services that stream programming like Netflix or sell programming like iTunes, several services offer search engines. You enter the name of the show you're looking for and it will tell you what services have it. These services are not always 100% up to date and not all of them cover all services. But here are a few to look at.

[CanIStream.it](#) – This searchable database for movies and TVs covers most of the major services and is usually up to date. It's available on the Web and as an app for iOS, Android and Windows.

[Fan TV](#) – This service is focused more around discovery of shows, but it does an admirable job of searching as well. You can get it on the Web or as an iOS app.

[Yahoo Video Guide](#) – An unheralded but surprisingly slick and comprehensive tool for finding who has what shows and movies. Part of the problem is that it pitches itself as a way to watch things which is a bit deceptive. It just launches the native apps for various services. The other problem is that it's not available on the Web, only as an iOS or Android app.

[Yidio](#) – Similar to CanIStream.it. Available on the Web, iOS and Android.

[Chromecast App](#) – This one is meant to be used with a Chromecast but a side-benefit is that it will detect what apps you have installed and search just those for shows and movies. Excellent if a tablet is serving as your TV. It's available for Android and iOS.

Cord-Cutting Step TWO: Pick your services

So now that you decided what programming you need, what are your options? I'm going to run through all the things I have used and what they're good for. This list is not meant to be exhaustive as there are many more services out there than I can cover. If you're into anime, for instance, Crunchyroll is just the tip of the iceberg. This section is meant to be an overview of the biggest services for those unfamiliar with the broader landscape.

Also I'm only going to talk about legal options that don't violate your terms of service. Yes, there are ways to get things without paying or that aren't available in your region. But we're going to keep it legit here.

The Streamers

These services will stream you exclusive and non-exclusive movies and TV shows. They generally require an Internet connection to watch.

Netflix

As if you didn't know, this service is available worldwide and gives access to lots of complete TV series from past seasons, some movies and lots of documentaries. It also creates award-winning original programming, both movie and TV shows, that can only be seen on Netflix. There are no ads.

Available on: AppleTV, Roku, Chromecast, Xbox, PlayStation, FireTV, AndroidTV, iOS, Android, Web, TiVo

Hulu

This is the best replacement for many broadcast network shows. It has current seasons the day after air from Fox, ABC, NBC and CW. Plus past seasons from many other networks and some quality original programming. It has a slightly higher quality movie collection than others largely thanks to the Criterion Collection library. The free tier has lots of ads, the paid tier fewer ads and the highest paid tier removes ads.

Available on: AppleTV, Roku, Chromecast, Xbox, PlayStation, FireTV, AndroidTV, iOS, Android, Web, TiVo

Amazon Prime

Amazon's video service comes packaged in with a subscription that provides free shipping, subscription ebooks and more. It's video service is similar to Netflix, having past seasons of TV shows, movies, and its own award-winning original programming. Recently Amazon began letting you pay extra to add service from cable movie networks including Showtime and Starz.

Available on: Roku, Xbox, PlayStation, FireTV, iOS, Android, Web, TiVo

HBO Now

This gives you access to everything HBO has including movies and original TV shows. There are no live channels but shows appear in the app as soon as they begin airing on TV. HBO gets

movies faster after they leave theatres than some of the other services. Show-wise it only features its own series but it has a deep archive of award-winning shows.

Available on: Apple TV, Roku, Chromecast, FireTV, AndroidTV, iOS, Android, Web

CBS All Access

The one gap in Hulu is current shows from CBS. CBS All Access gives you past seasons of shows CBS owns, plus current season shows. In markets where CBS owns the local station or has reached an agreement with its affiliate you can watch live streams of the CBS channel. This live channel is occasionally blacked out for sports.

Available on: AppleTV, Roku, Chromecast, Xbox, FireTV, AndroidTV, iOS, Android, Web

Showtime

Similar to HBO this app has movies showing on the Showtime channel as well as an archive of its TV series and current episodes arriving as they air. It also features live streams of its main channel.

Available on: AppleTV, Roku, Chromecast, FireTV, AndroidTV, iOS, Android, Web

Available as an add-on to: Amazon, Hulu, PlayStation Vue

YouTube Red

YouTube offers loads of video at all levels of quality for free. YouTube Red takes away commercials and gives you access to YouTube Originals that are higher-quality TV productions, although mostly still from YouTube stars.

Available on: AppleTV, Roku, Xbox, PlayStation, FireTV, AndroidTV, iOS, Android, Web, TiVo

The Online Stores

Not all shows are available in one of the other services. So with the money you're not spending on cable you may be able to justify paying for the season and downloading it. For movies you can also choose to rent and pay less though you don't get to keep it. Either gives the advantage of being able to watch offline whenever you want with no worry that a show will disappear from the service. Though keep in mind rentals do expire after a certain amount of time.

Purchase Sharing systems

One thing to understand about these stores is that they may be part of a system that shares access to movies (not TV shows) between the various stores. In other words, if you buy a movie in a store that's part of one of these systems it will be available to play from the libraries of other stores. For instance, let's say you buy a Disney movie from Google's Play Store. You can also get that movie and play it in iTunes and Vudu, if you're signed up for the Disney system.

The two major systems are:

Disney Movies Anywhere - Only for Disney movies but shares access across Google Play, iTunes, Vudu, Amazon and Microsoft.

[Ultraviolet](#) - This includes movies from several major studios, including Sony, Universal, Paramount, Fox, and Warner Brothers but NOT including Disney. You can access Ultraviolet movies in Vudu and, well, Flixster, CinemaNow, blinkbox, Cineplex Entertainment and JB Hi-Fi.

Online Stores

[iTunes](#) - If you use Apple devices, particularly the Apple TV this may work for you. Apple sells TV shows and movies. Most of what you buy is only accessible on Apple devices or through iTunes on Windows.

Available on: Apple TV, iTunes, iOS

[Google Play](#) - If you use Android devices this is your store. Purchased or TV shows and movies can be viewed on a computer, on any Android device including Android TV, as well as on Roku and iOS devices (though not Apple TV).

Available on: Chromecast, Android, iOS, Android TV, Roku, Web

[Amazon Instant Video](#) – Best if you live in the Amazon universe. You can buy movies and TV shows and easily watch them on on a computer or Amazon Fire device like the Kindle Fire and Fire TV. There is an Amazon app for iOS but not Apple TV.

Available on: Roku, Xbox, PlayStation, FireTV, iOS, Android, Web, TiVo

[Vudu](#) - This service sells movies and TV shows which can be watched on Vudu's apps across platforms. That means Computer, Android, iOS, Roku, Fire TV and more. It does not yet have an Apple TV app. It is the only service that is part of both Disney Movies Anywhere and Ultraviolet.

Available on: Roku, Chromecast, Xbox, PlayStation, FireTV, AndroidTV, iOS, Android, Web, TiVo, ChannelMaster

[Microsoft Movies & TV](#) – This used to be called Xbox Movies but it's now available on Windows devices as well. It sells movies and TV shows.

Available on: Xbox, Web.

There are many other stores, like [M-go](#) which is the default store on Roku. But the above are the ones with the largest catalogs and the most device compatibility.

The Live TV Services

There are two main services which operate multichannel live TV services over the Internet. They're similar to cable with live channels and some on demand options. But you don't need to have cable service to get them, just the Internet.

[Sling TV](#) - This one is available anywhere in the US and has apps for lots of platforms. It gives you access to many ABC family channels including ESPN. It also has news from around the world not just CNN. You can also access AMC and Disney channels and they continually add other channels. You can pay for a base package with a little of everything and then add channels in

packs by genre. It has also begun limited offerings of broadcast channels from ABC and Univision.

Available on: Roku, Chromecast, Xbox, FireTV, AndroidTV, iOS, Android, Web, ChannelMaster

PlayStation Vue - This service from Sony is available in limited markets and works on the PlayStation 3 and 4 Consoles and a few other platforms. It has local broadcast channels and extensive cable TV channels from most companies, like Fox, NBCUniversal, Turner, CBS but NOT ABC. So Fox Sports galore but no ESPN yet.

Available on: Chromecast, PlayStation, FireTV, iOS

Cord-cutting Step THREE: Pick your equipment

Once you've figured out what services you need to watch the things you want, you need to get the right equipment to make it as simple as possible. No prices are included since those change rapidly.

We are also not including Smart TVs here. Smart TV software is getting better but it's still not near what you can get from a separate box in most cases. And most people are more likely to spring \$50-\$100 for a new box than \$1,000 or more for a new TV. So my guess is you either have it or you don't.

A word about apps vs. channels. A lot of these devices also advertise games and weather apps and other such things along with video channels. Don't let this confuse you. These are little computers so they can do what a computer can do and some of the manufacturers take advantage of that to make them appeal to more than just the person who wants to watch TV. We're going to evaluate them here strictly on what kind of video services they offer.

Roku

If you have to pick just one device this will give you the most options. Roku doesn't have its own services so it's able to get the widest variety of channels. Essentially everything but iTunes purchases and PlayStation Vue can be played on a Roku.

Services available include: Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, HBO Now, CBS All Access, Showtime, YouTube, Google Play, Vudu, Sling TV

DVR (ChannelMaster or TiVo)

If you can get over-the-air reception, even for a few channels, a DVR can get you a lot of HD programming for free. TiVo's box now features commercial skip and has always provided easy access to major apps like Netflix, Hulu and Amazon. ChannelMaster is more affordable but does not have as good of an app selection, so it's better if you need it mostly for the DVR functions.

Services available include:

TiVo- Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, YouTube (Showtime through Hulu or Amazon), Vudu

Channelmaster- Vudu, Sling TV

Chromecast

This inexpensive dongle, plugs right into your HDMI port on the TV and becomes almost invisible. It's not for everyone though, because you control it from your phone, tablet or computer. Any Chromecast-enabled service, and there are many, can stream to the Chromecast from your device. It's the most affordable hardware. And even things like iTunes that aren't meant to work with Chromecast can sometimes be made to work with some workarounds.

Services available include: Netflix, Hulu, HBO Now, CBS All Access, Showtime, YouTube, Google Play, Vudu, Sling TV, PlayStation Vue

Fire TV

This one is from Amazon and has a good selection of apps. Its best integration is, not shockingly, with Amazon's own services so it's the right choice if you intend to get most of your programming from Amazon.

Services available include: Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, HBO Now, CBS All Access, Showtime, YouTube, Vudu, Sling TV, PlayStation Vue

Apple TV

This one is best if you intend to live in Apple's services. The old Apple TVs have a limited number of apps but include the majors like Netflix and Hulu. The newest Apple TVs have an app store so may yet add a lot of services but so far are limited as well. No Sling, PS Vue, Vudu etc. Although Apple TV lets you send your screen from any Apple device to the TV through something called Airplay. So there are workarounds.

Services available include: Netflix, Hulu, HBO Now, CBS All Access, Showtime, YouTube, iTunes

Android TV

Similar to the others but this one integrates well with the Google Play store. Unlike Roku or Apple TV multiple manufacturers make Android-TV based boxes so you get a better choice of features.

Services available include: Netflix, Hulu, HBO Now, CBS All Access, Showtime, YouTube, Google Play, Vudu, Sling TV

Android-LIKE Boxes

Just a note here that you will see a lot of devices that claim to deliver you thousands of channels for free or a low one-time cost. Sometimes these even claim to run Android. They are NOT running AndroidTV but the Android OS that's meant for phones and tablets. They generally overpromise what's available. You're essentially just paying for box that can deliver everything an Android tablet could. My recommendation is to steer clear, most of them sound too good to be true.

Game Consoles

The Xbox and PlayStation both have a good offering of apps from services like Netflix and Hulu, as well as their own video stores. They also can play Blu-ray discs and DVDs. The Xbox offers a passthrough from your TV service, so you could hook up a DVR and see it as an app on the Xbox. The PlayStation offers its own live TV service called PlayStation Vue. These are decent options for someone who also wants to play video games. But the consoles are expensive compared to other streaming boxes. If you don't care about games or discs, you can get more services on cheaper equipment.

Services available include:

Xbox - Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, CBS All Access, YouTube, Vudu, Microsoft, Sling TV (Showtime through Hulu or Amazon)

PlayStation - Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, YouTube, Vudu, PlayStation Vue (Showtime through Hulu, Vue or Amazon)

Computer

For some people just hooking up a computer to the TV is the best option. Computers give you access to almost every service out there. The downside is computer interfaces are not designed for sitting on the couch so they can be tricky sometimes. And the usual maintenance of computers and protection against viruses and such applies. So it's not for everyone. A compact computer like an Intel NUC, Asus VivoPC or Mac Mini make good choices here.

Services available include: Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, HBO Now, CBS All Access, Showtime, YouTube, iTunes (desktop), Google Play, Vudu, Microsoft, Sling TV

Tablet/Phone

It's worth mentioning that a large-screen tablet can often be the perfect TV for some people. iOS and Android generally have broader access to services than set-top boxes. You can even get cables to connect them to a TV through an HDMI port. Especially if only one or two people are usually watching this can work well. Some people I know even use 6-inch phones as their TV.

Services available include:

iOS - Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, HBO Now, CBS All Access, Showtime, YouTube, iTunes, Google Play, Vudu, Sling TV, PlayStation Vue

Android - Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, HBO Now, CBS All Access, Showtime, YouTube, Google Play, Vudu, Sling TV

That covers the major offerings. Again this is not meant to be an exhaustive list. We're not even touching on things like Blu-ray players that have streaming apps built-in. But as an introduction this gives you the basics and familiarity with the major players.

Cord-cutting achieved

Now that I've given you the basics you should be able to answer the following.

1. What Programming do I really need?
2. What services give me access to the programming I want?
3. What equipment do I need to access those services?

Make that ven diagram and you have your cord-cutting setup ready to go!

I hope you found this helpful. For ongoing coverage of cord cutting options and things to watch, check out Cordkillers, at Cordkillers.com.

And share your cord-cutting setup with us at cordkillers@gmail.com.

Appendix

Chart of Services and equipment

Equipment	Services													
		Netflix	Hulu	Amazon	HBO	CBS	Showtime	YouTube	iTunes	Google Play	Vudu	Microsoft	Sling TV	PS Vue
R o k u	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	
T i V o	x	x	x				-	x			x			
ChannelMaster											x		x	
Chromecast	x	x		x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x
F i r e T V	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x		x	X
A p p l e T V	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x					
A n d r o i d T V	x	x		x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	
X b o x	x	x	x				-	x			x	x	x	
P l a y S t a t i o n	x	x	x				-	x			x			x
C o m p u t e r	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
i O S	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
A n d r o i d	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	

- Is used to indicate Showtime is available as an add-on of another service like Hulu or Amazon.